

OUTCOME MEASUREMENT BASICS

What is outcome measurement?

Outcome measurement (OM) is a user-centered approach to planning and assessment of programs that are based on user needs and designed to achieve change. In this essay, we will break apart the definition to discuss what OM is and how libraries may use it as a planning and evaluation tool.

OM -- also known as outcome-based evaluation, outcome assessment, or results-based evaluation -- is a component of planning and assessment that focuses on program impact. Most libraries systematically measure their inputs (resources) and their outputs (activities). In other words, most evaluations are library-oriented and count what the library staff does. For example, how many books did the library circulate? How many reference questions did staff answer? How many programs did staff present? These are all important questions; libraries should continue to count what they do. Such information helps libraries evaluate their internal processes and assess their efficiency. The library's perceived value is usually related to these measures of the quality and quantity of effort.

OM is an additional way to assess library services and programs, one that has a very different perspective. As an aptly named journal article put it "From the user in the life of the library to the library in the life of the user." In OM the questions are user-oriented. For example, what has changed for the users as a result of our programs or services? How did our program make a difference in the lives of our users? By tracking the impact of their services and programs, libraries evaluate their effectiveness.

We all have wonderful anecdotes about the effects of library services on patron's lives, warm and fuzzy human-interest stories that our stakeholders love to hear. For example, a regular user stopped by to tell us that he got a new job as a result of our resume writing workshop. Or a mother reports that her children are doing better in school because she can help them with their homework as a result of our literacy program. These types of human impact, or outcomes, are planned for and then assessed in OM. In other words, OM helps us quantify our users' success stories to demonstrate the library's value in terms of *quality of effect*. Unlike anecdotes that are fortuitously shared and often surprise us, the outcomes measured in OM are planned for and reflect our expectations of a program or service.

How do we use outcome measurement?

In order to use OM, a library must define a community need and a library goal before creating a new program or service. Then it must select realistic outcomes that it hopes to achieve for its users before designing a program or service. Indicators of change must be identified. During and after the new program or service, data is collected to see if the program had the intended impact. In other words, assessment reveals whether the library achieved the expected outcomes -- usually reported in the amount of change in behavior, attitude, skills, knowledge or condition (situation). The library also sets a target or standard of success for itself to determine whether the program is having an impact on as many people as possible; if the target isn't met, the program needs to be improved in some way.

Let's take an example through those OM steps. Anytown, California is concerned about the unemployment rate among young adults who have dropped out of high school. The city council and the mayor have asked the department of education and other departments to focus on this issue in their planning. A study done by a local non-profit organization found that at-risk students need personalized homework assistance, access to resources, and increased self-confidence about the possibilities of future employment if they are to graduate from high school. The Anytown Public Library decides that it will address this community need and so defines a library goal: To provide teens with homework assistance and curriculum support materials so that they can succeed in school. The library initiates 24/7 electronic homework help as well as in-person tutoring at the library by older adult volunteers.

The outcome the library hopes to achieve is that participating young adults will be more successful in school. The indicators are that participating teens will improve their school attendance and their grades. More specifically, during the next semester the students will double the number of days that they attend school and will increase their grade point average by one point. In other words the library is aiming for changes in behavior and knowledge by the participating youth. Note that the quantity of change (double the number of days in attendance and increase the GPA by one point) is set as a standard of success for the participant.

Because the library's outcome assumes that students will use the new services over a two year period, an interim outcome is also defined. The interim outcome is that students will use tutoring and/or electronic homework help and rate the service as helpful. In this case, if the students do not use the new library services and consider them beneficial, the long range outcome can never be achieved. So the interim outcome is both a benefit for the user and a milestone for the

program. The indicator for the interim outcome is that students will report that one or more of the new services are helping them with their homework.

The high schools partner with the library by identifying at-risk students and promoting the new library service to these teens. The schools also provide the library with baseline information (data) on the students including the number of days attending school and their grade point averages (GPA). At the end of the school year the school provides updated attendance and GPA information so that the library can assess whether the program achieved its outcome of greater success in school. For the interim outcome, the library will collect information by doing a survey of a random sample of at-risk students identified by the school.

The library sets itself a target of 50%, stating that 50% of the identified students will rate the service as beneficial on a 1 to 4 point scale. The library also sets a long range target of 75%, stating that 75% of the participating students will double the number of days they attend school and will increase their GPA by one point.

Note that the Anytown Library could also measure other outcomes for the students such as improved self-esteem or improved communication with elders. And it could measure outcomes for the senior volunteers as well.

Note too that the Anytown Library did not take on the entire community problem of unemployment among young adults but set its own goal to be relevant to its mission and realistic. The library did not work alone but partnered with the high schools. And the library could not accept full responsibility – credit or blame – for the outcome because many other factors influenced the students' success in schools. But the library could show a positive change in the behavior of the young adults who had participated in the program.